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SUBJECT: THE CORNICHE HEMMED: WILL VOTERS SWALLOW WADE'S
DISRUPTIVE PRESTIGE PROJECTS?

SUMMARY

1. (U) Two of three major roads leading through the Dakar peninsula and downtown are closed by construction. Using Kuwaiti funds for the next Islamic summit and on short notice, President Wade on May 10 began tunnel projects and road widening on the well-known Corniche, redirected traffic to already choked back alleys, and turned yet another part of the capital into a massive traffic jam. Gridlocked foreigners have since been heard remastering command of the profane and scatological vernaculars.

2. (SBU) Ever-patient Dakarais, in contrast, seem of two minds. In the coming campaign, the opposition will contend Wade could have found better use for the money, and they predict economic losses. Many, though see Wade using Arab money, not Senegalese, and figure he is giving them something for nothing. Wade expects an electoral boost, and may well see these projects, coordinated by son Karim, as first steps toward long-term goals of a new airport and capital. END SUMMARY.

FROM COAST ROAD TO LABYRINTH

3. (U) Dakar is on a peninsula, and there are three main ways to get downtown: the autoroute, essentially closed a year ago for still-unfinished interchange construction; the so-called Voie du Degagement du Nord8 (VDN); and the Corniche. Some smaller routes are used mainly by jitney vans, taxis and the year-old Tata bus fleet. None is particularly efficient, though Dakarais often have a favorite way of avoiding ferocious rush hour congestion. Arrivals at the airport and the Dakar middle-class of the plushest suburbs choose the Corniche: snaking over cliffs on eternal verge of collapse, it offers rugged Atlantic Coast beauty and a feel of vast space despite bottlenecking in a clamorous urban fishing village.

4. (U) Parts of the Corniche remain open, but getting downtown or out of town involves detours through heavily populated and deeply potholed back streets. The construction firms have set up barriers to channel traffic, and blue-uniformed and unarmed volunteers help police and gendarmes herd Dakar's unassuming but undisciplined drivers. Commuting time has increased; Friday prayer hour, once a great time to drive, is now an alley-creeping, fender-grazing bad dream. An accident, stall, flat tire or police misdirection of traffic, not to mention the inconvenience of pedestrians, kiosk vendors, street cleaners or beggars, can stop thousands of cars for what seem endless minutes.

5. (U) Economic losses are almost certain in the short term, as even those who direct the projects admit. Gas stations, boutiques, the main tourist market and the fish market along

the Corniche, are all but closed. The owner of a posh new restaurant that had been rapidly expanding clientele recently told us we were his only customers all week. A taxi driver said he upped his price to go downtown by 60 percent but was still losing money. Throughout town, transport costs are rising even as delivery times increase and become less reliable. A labor leader predicted a "disaster" for workers.

¶6. (U) For the diplomatic community, attendance at receptions is problematic as guests cope with longer and unpredictable driving times and closure of access roads. The police volunteers allow some friendly cheating by leaving just a car's width of space between barricades, but these must be approached at an often impossible angle from crushingly crowded streets or over sidewalks. Getting to the Ambassador's Residence, superbly situated when the Corniche is open, presents a puzzle that not all guests can unravel.

THE POLITICAL EFFECT COULD BE POSITIVE DESPITE IT ALL

¶7. (SBU) Foreign residents, and by no means just westerners, have reacted with exasperation and occasional anger. One African diplomat was observed arguing with a gendarme who had objected to his stopping in mid-traffic to make a cellular phone call, physically harassing a following car after the long line behind him had tried to hoot him along, and, then, in apparent fury purposely blocking traffic by drag racing jitney taxis in the middle lane of a nominally two-lane street. Others are generally not so choleric, though, and limit themselves to a quiet under-the-breath discourse with other drivers and an evening over-strong-drink replay of the traffic brutishness with fellow road warriors.

¶8. (U) Dakarais, in contrast, remain even-tempered, though even their traffic-bound smiles seem forced. One embassy

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employee thought it hardly worth mentioning that his evening commute ballooned one night from 30 minutes to two hours and a half. People are getting up earlier, but admit "we Senegalese are not early risers," and join rush hour jams. Those who are cross with Wade fault him mainly because children in once fairly quiet urban neighborhoods are now in danger from pollution and traffic accidents.

¶9. (U) Wade has publicized road construction and private firms' building of several hotels along the Corniche, as preparation for the Organization of the Islamic Conferences (OIC) Summit, and as a way to reinforce Dakar as an international air traffic hub. He has emphasized his interpretation that the Kuwaiti funds he is using are grants. Several Dakarais, of different social strata, have told us, "le vieux (the old guy) is not spending Senegalese money, so we're getting something for nothing." A beachfront artist told us, "it's inconvenient, but Wade isn't doing it for us, but for our grandchildren."

KARIM AND THE GRANDS TRAVAUX

¶10. (SBU) Wade's son Karim is in charge of coordinating OIC Summit preparations, including road construction. He is also said to be close to the firms building luxury hotels along the Corniche (at least one of which hugs cliffs so steep and narrow only a daring architect would have imagined building there). Many think the projects will be Karim's chance to prove himself a competent manager on a national and even internationally important scale.

¶11. (SBU) As we understand Wade's logic of construction, a new Corniche and autoroute, followed by widening of the third route, the VDN, will make Dakar more important as an international air transport, diplomatic, and commercial hub. It will also draw full attendance at the Islamic Summit which Wade reminds Senegalese he still expects to host. In 1991, Dakar airport was too small to park all OIC aircraft, which were parked in neighboring countries. This time around, a

new runway (but only a runway) will be built outside Dakar and distant from the current airport. This runway will be the nucleus of a new airport that, over time, will entice Dakarois to invest and build away outside Dakar peninsula. All this would go far toward realizing Wade's long-time vision of Grands Travaux: a new airport, new capital, and new highway linking them to Dakar.

¶12. (U) Visit Dakar,s classified website at <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/af/dakar>.
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